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# The Object of Art History

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Gombrich, Ernst Hans. *Méditations sur un cheval de bois et autres essais sur la théorie de l'art*, Paris : Phaidon, 2003

Pomian, Krzysztof. *Des saintes reliques à l'art moderne : Venise-Chicago, XIIIe-XXe siècle*, Paris : Gallimard, 2003, (Bibliothèque des histoires)

Pommier, Edouard. *Winckelmann, inventeur de l'histoire de l'art*, Paris : Gallimard, 2003, (Bibliothèque des histoires)

Recht, Roland. *L'Objet de l'histoire de l'art*, Paris : Collège de France : Fayard, 2003, (Leçons inaugurales)

- 1 Roland Recht's inaugural lesson, in fifty dense and elegant pages, punctuated by enlightening quotations, without any doubt provides the best introduction to the discipline. The author starts by painting a sweeping picture of the art historians of the Collège de France since Charles Blanc in 1878, before questioning their successive observations. He is thus prompted to decline the various readings of ornament, style and space, which range from the evolutionist thesis linked with the primacy of the natural sciences, to the analytical perspective that is now topical. Roland Recht suggests placing "style", conceived, based on Paul Valéry, as the "form of meaning" at the heart of the present-day aims of the discipline, provided that it is understood as "the culmination of a selective process" between the commissioning party, the models and the subjectivity of the artist. At the same time, from artists' biographies to monumental topographies, he sketches a history of the patrimonial sentiment which, in the period marked by the quarrels between antiquarians and historians, fuelled the collective memory and community sociability, before becoming diluted into "the atmospheric and the local", starting with Alois Riegl.

- 2 A generation ago, certain essays by Ernst Hans Gombrich pursued the same-rare-design of return to self and disciplinary prospect. The book, which is once again available, but in a pitiful format when compared with the 1986 edition, takes up Popper's critique of Hegelianism (in the critical readings of Arnold Hauser, André Malraux and Charles Sterling): the art historian must "consider the work of art in its special singularity as a work made by a deft hand and a great mind, in response to very tangible demands". Unlike all the variants of positivism, the author asserts that the "qualifications" of art history "merely transmit a meaning within a tradition of writing". As heir to Aby Warburg, E. H. Gombrich in the end maintains that the motifs, methods and symbols of minor productions, as well as those of romantic imagery, are crucially important for the analysis of great art—even affirming, with regard to abstraction, that "the content of pictures always greatly exceeds that the eye manages to grasp".
- 3 If Gombrich's articles bear witness to the various debates on iconology, its challenge and its limits, and if (apart from just one) they stem from the intellectual climate of the Cold War, those of Krzysztof Pomian play readily with typologies dear to the post-structuralist history of the 1980s. Aloof from the tricks of the oral lecture shared by Roland Recht and Ernst Hans Gombrich, his essays often take on the enumerative and nomenclative turn peculiar to encyclopaedia articles and pieces from catalogues. The history of art history is here erased in favour of a general anthropology of the collectionism identified by the sacrifices allowed by humankind, first in the name of the hereafter, then with regard to future generations, following a "grand narrative" of secularization and democratization. So Johann Joachim Winckelmann merely incarnates a variant of the device, hermeneutics as opposed to connoisseurship, as a counterpart to Mariette. Gombrich, who, for his part, is more critical and more precise, regarded the German antiquarians as both a prophet of the past (within the new aesthetic religion) and as the founder of the "physiognomic illusion" where he saw a whole tradition of art history being ruined.
- 4 But the Winckelmann legendariness is back in the form of Edouard Pommier, in a perspective of old-style literary history. Overlooking the new analyses of the writing of art history dear to Alex Potts, Barbara Stafford, Michael Fried and David Carrier, Edouard Pommier remains faithful to the heroic tradition of his character, initiator of the inaugural rupture with the *Lives*. Apart from the odd repetition, the compilation, already available in Italian (Minerva, 2000), is organized around three moments ("History of art, religion of art, art and freedom") to illuminate the themes of grace, beauty, norm and imitation, by emphasizing the contradiction between programmatic Antiquity and historical Antiquity. The most noteworthy study, that of the 1989 *Revue de l'art*, strives to carefully reconstruct the network of readings and appropriations which, a posteriori, makes Winckelmann one of the heroes of the Revolution, and his text one of the most special cases of critical acclaim.
- 5 Roland Recht makes sacrifices to this theme of reception in the delivery of his lecture, when he evokes at once his father, in relation to the photographic revelation of which this latter was the pastmaster in the child's eyes, and J. J. Winckelmann, still, in relation to the Greece depicted in the History of Art among the Ancients. This is tantamount to suggesting that the effort of transcription and exhibition which underpins the history of art hails from duplicated catastrophes: that of family memory, as Roland Recht describes its sorrows in *La Chambre claire*, like that of antique art, the way modern archaeology traces its disappearance. As if the history of art, with its rhetoric of presence, were a learning of loss.